

Broome County Executive Debbie Preston 2017 Budget Message Thursday, September 15, 2016

Good afternoon.

Thank you Chairman Reynolds, Majority Leader Flagg, Minority Leader Myers and Legislators for giving me the floor today.

I'd like to welcome employees, Department Heads, Municipal Leaders and most importantly members of our community to the 2017 Broome County Budget Address.

Over the past five years, we've made difficult decisions to help turn what was a bleak outlook for the future of Broome County, into one that is positive and improving.

I stand before you this afternoon to tell you that, while we have much work yet to do, those decisions are paying off.

As I said in my State of the County Address a few months ago, we're in the midst of a remarkable evolution.

This community is turning the corner from what we were to the new economy that we're headed to.

Getting there requires real leadership, and the guts and moxie to get the job done.

Some of our decisions may not have been popular.

But it's more important to do what is right over what is popular, because it's worth it for the sake of moving Broome County forward.

To get this ship turned around, we've held the line on spending and made responsible decisions for the people who sign our paychecks: the nearly 200,000 residents of Broome County.

This hasn't been easy thanks to the tax cap imposed on all municipalities by New York State.

This year, to stay under the cap, calculated by Albany's complex formula as 0.9%.

Even with all of the challenges, we've kept our tax increases low, each and every year I've held this office.

0% in 2013.

1.77% in 2014.

2.49% in 2015.

1.88% for 2016.

And now, I'm announcing that my 2017 budget delivers a 0.77% projected tax increase in 2017.

Over the past 5 years that I've served, we've delivered an average tax increase of 1.38%.

Between 2006 and 2011 under my predecessors, taxpayers faced an average annual increase of almost 4%.

That was way too high. There's no way our taxpayers could have afforded more of the same.

So we put our nose to the grindstone to deliver.

I want to thank our department heads for working with us through this year's difficult budget process.

We have embraced and managed change for the people of Broome County.

And the numbers show its working.

When I took office in 2012, the County was plagued with \$20 million in short term debt.

Over the past 5 years, we've worked diligently, keeping our spending low, to cut that debt in half.

Today I'm announcing that our current projection is for the County's short term debt to be reduced to \$10 million by the end of this year.

Aside from debt, we've also prioritized cutting operational costs everywhere we can.

We sold vehicles from the fleet.

We consolidated office space.

We cut salaries to some of our top positions in the County.

And much more.

Now, I'm proud to announce a new and creative way that Broome County will save money – and lots of it.

Later this month, we will break ground on a 20 acre, 4 megawatt solar farm in the Town of Conklin.

It will generate enough power to cover 25% of County departments' total power demand.

That will equate to a reduction in costs of millions of dollars while protecting the environment.

We'll keep working to find innovative ways to save your money.

JOBS:

The best way to fix any government's budget – whether it's a discussion of saving money or tax rates - is through a strong economy.

Since my first day, I've said that Priority One is Jobs, Jobs, Jobs.

That hasn't changed a bit.

Over the last several decades, we've seen many of our industries pack up and leave to places where it was easier to run a business.

That's part of the ever-changing world that we live in. But we've been working hard to get our image back, and restore those lost jobs and opportunities.

Earlier this year, Dick's Sporting Goods announced it was coming home and opening a distribution center in Conklin that will create more than 450 new jobs.

Last summer, Modern Marketing Concepts announced more than 600 new jobs coming to our community.

We've made other recent new job announcements from ADEC, Mountain Fresh Dairy, Roberts Stone and others.

This is our evolution in action.

When I took office in January 2012, the Broome County unemployment rate was 9.8%, according to the New York State Labor Department.

As of July, we're at 5.3%.

That's still too high – but it's a dramatic improvement over where we were five short years ago.

This just proves that we are turning the corner and making it easier for businesses to come and stay in New York.

And just last week, Tioga Downs Casino broke ground on its new hotel and convention center, which will go right along with the opening of its brand new casino.

We will be seeing additional revenue from Tioga Downs – plus hundreds of new jobs for people all over our region.

A small snapshot of how things are evolving is available by looking at the County Clerk's records.

I'm happy to report that the County has seen an increase in transaction fees related to home sales at the Clerk's Office.

Pending home sales are up almost 8% over last year, and closed home sales are up nearly 9% over last year.

These are all strong indications that we have turned the corner and our economy is on the rise.

We have much more work to do, and I won't stop until we continue moving that unemployment trendline down, down, down.

HEROIN:

While the outlook on jobs is improving, we're facing a different kind of battle in the days, weeks, months and even years ahead.

Our area is facing a critical health concern: the terrible and tragic heroin epidemic that's plaguing our community and many other parts of the state and nation.

Last year, I told our county department heads that this is the fight of the decade.

And we're now deep in the trenches of this tough battle.

It's important to understand this situation hasn't arisen overnight and won't end overnight.

Defeating this crisis is going to take a coordinated and concerted effort by elected officials, government agencies, law enforcement, non-profit organizations, community members, families and many others.

I implore everyone in government and the community to mobilize in this fight.

We need everyone to educate themselves and their loved ones about the danger of these drugs.

Winning this fight is not about I, but about we.

We can, and will, win — because the cost of losing even one more life to an overdose is too high.

I'm proud to say we've worked hard knocking on doors in Washington, D.C. and Albany to secure state and federal funding to the tune of nearly \$6 million dollars.

That's almost double what was budgeted in the previous year for drug and alcohol treatment.

This builds on the strong steps we've already made to help those who suffer from addiction — both in terms of treatment and cracking down on dealers.

We have a long list of initiatives that we've already undertaken and I would be glad to discuss them with you.

I take this issue seriously, and personally.

And I'm grateful to be joined by a strong team of fellow leaders in our community who are as committed to fighting heroin as I am.

We'll keep fighting the good fight to save every life we can.

I'd like to particularly commend District Attorney Steve Cornwell for working hard on this issue.

So, to help boost our team efforts to win this war, my budget allocates funding for three brand new Assistant District Attorney positions.

The district attorney has committed to using alternatives to incarceration, including electronic monitoring of petty criminals, without jeopardizing the safety of our community.

This will reduce the jail population.

Those savings will be used to help pay for the new positions.

With this significant boost in staffing, I know that our D.A.'s office will have the resources it needs to get the job done.

VETERANS:

Another good fight is the one to help our veterans – those who have sacrificed so much to serve us.

We have nearly 14,000 Veterans in Broome County.

I've made it a top priority to help them – through new honors and accolades at the Arena and elsewhere, to increased funding for services, to developing a special veterans newsletter.

Day to day, many individuals rely on our Veteran Services Department for a variety of issues - finding treatment, financial help, counseling, obtaining medals and military documentation – the list goes on and on.

We are obtaining \$185,000 annually to run the Joseph P. Dwyer Peer to Peer Support program through our Veterans Services Department and our Department of Mental Health, providing peer to peer mentoring services that will serve Veterans returning from active duty.

I want to thank Senator Akshar for securing funding for this very important program.

These courageous veterans deserve the best help we can provide, so today I'm announcing that my budget adds a new

part-time assistant to the Veterans Services Department so we can help more of our Veterans every day, every week, all year long.

And my budget doubles the amount of funding, from \$50,000 to \$100,000, to cover the needs of our veterans that are not currently being met in our community.

They gave so much for us; it's only right that we continue to give back.

WILLOW POINT

We've made big improvements in other, much larger, departments, too.

Since I took office, there have been rumors and political silliness that I was looking to privatize or close the Willow Point Nursing Home.

Nothing, and I mean nothing, could be farther from the truth.

But make no mistake, in 2012, Willow Point was on a path to disaster.

We fought tooth and nail and I'm happy to announce that we have transformed that facility.

As I stand here today, my 2017 budget projects adding to the fund balance by nearly \$400,000, the largest it's been in over 20 years.

We made the tough decision to privatize food service County wide, saving taxpayers \$1.2 million a year.

We've increased use of our rehabilitation facility, saving taxpayers about \$750,000 a year, while providing better service.

And speaking of service, we are hiring and retaining our nurses, which is imperative to the future of Willow Point.

Instead of focusing on replacing people, we can now focus on improving the services there.

I'd like to recognize the Administrator of Willow Point, Kevin Carey, for his hard work in turning that facility around.

TRANSIT

Another department that has undergone a complete transformation for the better is B.C. Transit.

It's another department that was rumored to be privatized or closed under my administration, but that didn't happen.

Much like Willow Point, B.C. Transit is on an upward trend.

We completed our first route analysis in over 20 years and found ways to improve service while saving taxpayers money.

We increased the frequency on the busiest bus lines and expanded service to new locations.

After two full months of the changes, 85 percent of customers surveyed feel that service is as good as or even better than just a year ago.

And those changes will yield a yearly savings of nearly \$400,000, making Transit more self-sufficient, and less reliant on taxpayer dollars to operate.

And it comes with no increase in fares.

I'd like to recognize Commissioner of Transit Greg Kilmer for working with us to get Transit on the right path.

EMERGENCY SERVICES:

We've also worked very hard to increase public safety.

Following the floods of 2006 and 2011, we didn't have a choice. The risk was just too high for our people.

Today I'm announcing that we're also adding a dispatcher position to help handle the increase in call volume in our 9-1-1 center.

The more people we have answering calls, the quicker we can send help to an emergency.

Additionally, our Emergency Services department is installing new communication towers in several communities including the Town of Barker, Town of Binghamton, Town of Fenton, Town of Kirkwood and Town of Vestal which will increase the coverage area for responding to emergency situations.

Previously, there were pockets throughout the County where radio transmission was impossible, making it much more difficult to respond to an emergency.

We are improving our infrastructure, increasing our communication area and in turn increasing the safety of our communities.

Speaking of infrastructure, with additional funds from New York State, we expect to undertake even more road and bridge projects and have committed over \$2.77 million in our 2017 capital improvement program for road repairs and rehabilitation. This is the highest it has been in recent history and possibly ever.

SALES TAX/MUNICIPALITIES:

No Budget Address would be complete without a serious discussion of revenues.

It's no secret that it's been a very difficult time when it comes to sales tax revenue.

But we're starting to see a rebound, and people are starting to spend more as our Jobs outlook improves.

In this budget, we are anticipating a 1.5% increase in sales tax revenue for 2017.

This sales tax revenue has a direct impact on Broome County's local municipalities.

In 2009, the County Legislature and former County Executive decided to eliminate the 50/50 split of sales tax revenue with our city, towns and villages.

As Town of Conklin Supervisor at the time, I was outraged by this action of taking away a major source of revenue.

When I was elected County Executive, I promised to return to the 50/50 split within 7 years.

And, now five years in, we are well on track to meet that goal.

Our current year's budget delivered even more, getting the split to 52/48 by year's end.

Added together, it tallies up to an astounding \$2 million delivered back to our municipalities – money they would not have received under the formula of my predecessors.

Now, for 2017, my budget again delivers more for our municipalities – this time increasing the share by another 15%.

That means, if the numbers come in as projected, we will have returned \$3.3 million to our municipalities.

But sales tax relief isn't the only way that we are helping our local municipalities keep their costs low.

We've reduced their contributions to our local dog shelter, saving them \$70,000 annually.

We're keeping the election costs to municipalities flat for the third year in a row – despite rising costs at the Board of Elections.

These savings will help our city, towns and villages keep their taxes low.

I meet with the Mayors and Supervisors on a quarterly basis and at our last meeting in August, we informed them of the additional sales tax revenue.

Earlier this week, Binghamton Mayor Rich David announced during his budget address a .25% tax decrease for 2017, thanks in part to us returning more sales tax to the municipalities this year.

That's what we have to continue to do: Keep taxes down so people can afford to live here, and businesses want to move here or remain here.

If we don't do that most basic function, all the political rhetoric in the world isn't going to accomplish anything.

CLOSING

We live in a different time; a more challenging time than most of us grew up in.

And we believe we are keeping up with the times.

We are making changes that are incredibly important and necessary for the evolution of Broome County.

Did we have tough decisions to make?

Yes.

Did we have the guts to make those tough decisions?

Yes we did.

Were they all popular?

Nope.

But we had the moxie to take a stand and say enough is enough.

Our taxpayers can't afford a 4 or 5% tax increases every year like the old days.

I've said that from the start, and I'll keep saying. You know exactly where I stand.

Without these difficult decisions, our residents would have been facing possible double-digit tax increases and potentially a loss in services.

The changes that we have made were done so with the taxpayer in mind.

But the journey doesn't end here.

We will continue to come up with creative ways to cut costs and increase revenue, because that's what our bosses have asked of us.

And we will work together to make Broome County a great place to live, work and raise a family.

That process started in 2012, continues to this day, and will continue well into the future so we leave our children a Broome County they are proud of.

I look forward to working with you over the coming weeks to finalize this budget for the people of Broome County.

Thank you.